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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HELSINKI 001200

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SUBJECT: FINNISH POLDIR ON EU'S NEXT STEPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE WAKE OF A SUCCESSFUL EUROMED MINISTERIAL

Classified By: POLCHIEF GREGORY THOME FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

**¶1.** (C) Summary: The Finnish EU Presidency has emerged from the Nov. 27-28 EUROMED Ministerial with a decidedly upbeat impression of both the substance and the atmospherics surrounding the EU's discussions with Israel, the Palestinians and other Middle Eastern stakeholders. MFA Political Director Vierros-Villeneuve told us that the ceasefire in the region and positive statements from both Hamas officials and Israeli PM Olmert on the eve of EUROMED helped the Finns keep discussions from degenerating into shouting matches and achieve a meaningful set of ministerial conclusions. She characterized the "Spanish-French proposals" for the MEPP "basically dead." Regarding a Palestinian national unity government (NUG), the EU strongly supports its formation and is looking heavily to President Abbas to determine whether Hamas's compliance with the international community's conditions is sufficient. End Summary.

**¶2.** (SBU) Emboffs met November 29 with Finnish MFA Political Director Pilvi-Sisko Vierros-Villeneuve to get a read-out on the European and Mediterranean Foreign Ministers' Barcelona Process (EUROMED) meetings and on the EU's discussions of the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) with Israel, the Palestinians and other regional stakeholders.

Finns Upbeat on Atmospherics and Substance

**¶3.** (C) Vierros Villeneuve was clearly pleased with the results of the EU's bilateral meetings with the Israelis and the Palestinians, as well as the EUROMED Ministers' plenary dinner which focused specifically on the MEPP. Past EUROMED plenaries have tended to degenerate into "shouting matches," and Vierros Villeneuve said this was something the Israelis and the Finns both sought strenuously to avoid. Israeli FM Tzipi Livni met beforehand with Finnish FM Erkki Tuomioja to remind him that this was her first EUROMED meeting and that the conversation could not turn into an "attack" by the Arab group on Israel. The Finnish Presidency worked hard with both sides to stick to a productive agenda, Vierros-Villeneuve said, and their effort was greatly assisted by the surprise announcement of a ceasefire in the region as well as by positive public statements from Israeli PM Olmert and Hamas officials on the eve of EUROMED. Vierros-Villeneuve also credited the Arab delegations' seriousness and FM Livni who, she said, has developed great credibility among European -- and even Arab -- leaders.

**¶4.** (C) These positive atmospherics produced substantive results. In addition to re-confirming commitments to the

most recent ceasefire, all sides agreed to a set of EUROMED ministerial conclusions -- something that has only occurred once previously. None of the conclusions was earth-shattering, Vierros-Villeneuve opined, but they focused on a way forward, and the ministers negotiated them seriously and even with a hint of optimism. As expected, the Arab states consistently sought to water down many of stronger conclusions that some European ministers and Israel pressed for, but they were largely forthcoming and expressed a willingness to compromise.

"Spanish-French" Proposals Fizzle

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15. (C) With all sides re-committing themselves to the Quartet Principles and the Road Map, the rather nebulous new "Spanish-French" proposals for the MEPP gained little traction during EUROMED. Vierros-Villeneuve said that High Rep Javier Solana was unenthusiastic about them, and that many member states remained preoccupied by the facts that the proposals have been poorly vetted and appeared to "offer no new ideas." Indeed, she added, it appeared that there was less than full agreement between the Spanish and the French regarding their own proposals, and that no documents have actually been formally circulated to the MS. Vierros-Villeneuve acknowledged that a new set of Europe-generated proposals might be useful if it served to re-emphasize the continuing need for close EU participation in the MEPP and to reconfirm a commitment to the Quartet Principles. However, she noted, the "Spanish-French" proposal as it stands appears "basically dead."

Palestinian National Unity Government

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16. (C) Looking from EUROMED toward the future,

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Vierros-Villeneuve

reiterated that the formation of a Palestinian NUG remains a key priority for the EU. Europe, the US and Israel "need a counterpart on the Palestinian side with whom we can engage."

The EU remains fully committed to the three conditions the international community has set for Hamas to participate in a NUG.

However, alluding to what may be a possible divergence between US and EU views on this matter, she said that the EU will look primarily to President Mahmoud Abbas to determine when and if Hamas has fulfilled those conditions sufficiently. We should be

willing to work with a NUG if one emerges that is acceptable to

Abbas, Vierros-Villeneuve said, "because he knows the international community's conditions and has even more conditions of his own."

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